The Good of the Many

by: Peter Bugarchich

The smoke from the crematoriums smeared the sky in gray veils, heavy with the stench of burning fat. Ash fell in slow flakes, white and greasy, settling on the streets like obscene snow. People brushed it from their shoulders, but never from their mouths. The Ministry said the ash was only waste, proof of impurities burned away for progress. “Sacrifice is noble,” the speakers droned from every corner. “Sacrifice is the good of the many.”

Lena had believed this.

She’d whispered it to herself while standing in ration lines that reeked of mold and sickness. She’d repeated it when she reported her neighbor for hoarding bread. She remembered the mother’s scream as the guards dragged her children away; remembered her own voice shouting, “The many must survive!”

That family’s ashes had floated down the next morning.

Now, walking the sterile corridor of the Ministry of Continuity, Lena clutched a sealed file bound in black leather. The wax insignia was cracked, brittle. She wasn’t supposed to look. She was only a courier, promoted for loyalty. Promotions were rare. She should have been proud.

But curiosity gnawed. Her hand shook as she peeled the seal away.

Inside were lists.

She saw names she knew: the teacher three doors down, the boy who played in the snow, the woman with one good arm who sang in ration lines. All marked *Utilization.*

Her stomach clenched. Utilization meant labor—factories, construction, noble work. But the lists weren’t sorted by trade. They were divided by blood type. By medical history.

Then she saw it:

Mira K., age 28. AB Negative.
Her sister.

And beside it, underlined in thick black ink: *Harvest Approved.*

The corridor spun.

Lena pressed her hand to her mouth. She had always swallowed the lies: that trains took people to farms, that camps reeducated them, that “utilization” meant survival. But now the truth spread open before her like a surgical wound.

She remembered the heavy trucks with reinforced doors, the antiseptic stink around the crematorium smoke, the metal drums unloaded by masked men.

They weren’t sending people to work. They were *disassembling them.*

She flipped deeper into the file, her pulse roaring. Diagrams. Cold, clinical illustrations. Not of machines, but of bodies. Livers, kidneys, marrow. Fat measured in kilograms. The “harvest” wasn’t metaphor—it was procedure.

Stage One: Sedation.
Stage Two: Organ Retrieval.
Stage Three: Tallow Rendering.

Beside each stage were charts of yield. A human being reduced to numbers: liters of blood, pounds of tissue, ounces of protein. Nothing wasted. Even bones were powdered for cement.

Her sister’s name was penciled beside a column marked “High Compatibility: Class A Recipient.” Whoever Class A was, they would live on Mira’s lungs, Mira’s heart, Mira’s eyes.

Lena gagged, bile rising into her throat.

The corridor cameras blinked faintly, recording her every breath. By the time she reached Havel’s office, the Director would know she had seen. Her hesitation was already treason.

Her name was probably being inked on a list, even now.

She clutched the folder, sweat smearing the diagrams. Mira’s voice whispered in her head, from a time before the Ministry tightened its grip: *Intentions are masks, Lena. Don’t trust anyone who hides their eyes when they speak.*

She had laughed at the warning then. Now the words scraped raw inside her.

The guards flanking Havel’s steel door watched her approach. Their rifles gleamed, bayonets sharpened. One lifted his chin. “Delivery?”

Her mouth was dry. She nodded.

The door hissed open.

Inside, Director Havel sat behind his desk, a scalpel of a man in pressed uniform and shining medals. His office reeked faintly of antiseptic, like the trucks, like the smoke.

“Courier Lena,” he said smoothly. “Step forward.”

She obeyed, legs trembling.

“Did you read it?” he asked.

Her heart seized. The cameras had seen. The cracked seal was proof. Lies would only shorten her death.

“Yes,” she whispered.

Havel’s mouth curved slightly. “Then you understand.”

“Understand?” she choked.

“That sacrifice is not equal.” He tapped the file. “The weak preserve the strong. The many preserve the few. Arithmetic, Lena.”

Her skin crawled. “My sister is on this list—”

“Your sister will save someone worth ten of her,” Havel interrupted. “Perhaps even me. Perhaps you, if you continue to serve.”

He slid the folder open, flipping pages. The diagrams stared at her: cross-sections of Mira, reduced to organs and ounces.

“You see?” Havel said gently, as though speaking to a child. “This is not cruelty. This is order.”

From the far wall came a low hum. Lena turned her head, and the blood drained from her body. A glass panel stretched across the wall, tinted until now. With a hiss, it cleared.

Behind it, floodlights glared onto a steel chamber. Inside, naked bodies hung upside-down from hooks, pale and trembling, mouths gagged with metal clamps. Tubes ran from their veins into clear sacks filling with dark red liquid. Their eyes rolled wildly, pupils dilated with fear.

A conveyor rattled. One body—no longer whole, chest cavity open and hollow—slid toward a furnace mouth. The heat shimmered, flames licking as mechanical arms fed it in piece by piece.

The sound was a wet crackle of flesh blistering.

Lena staggered back, bile spilling from her lips.

Havel didn’t flinch. “Every empire is built on bodies, Lena. Ours simply admits it.”

She shook, vision swimming. She remembered her neighbor’s children, their screams. She remembered the ash that had settled in her hair, soft and greasy, and how she had brushed it away without thought.

Now she knew what it was.

Her hands clutched the folder, smearing blood-ink diagrams. “You’re butchering them.”

“We are preserving life,” Havel corrected. “A single healthy officer can serve decades. A peasant girl’s liver serves for days. Which is worth more?”

His eyes locked onto hers. “You’ve been chosen to see beyond illusion. Most never do. That is your reward.”

The hum of the machinery grew louder, vibrating the floor. She could smell the furnace smoke through the vents now, thick with roasted fat, sweet and sickening.

Her stomach twisted. Every act of loyalty, every denunciation, every whispered prayer to the Ministry had led here. Not to salvation. Not to nobility. To slaughter. And she had been its accomplice.

Havel dipped his pen in ink. “You will assist with tomorrow’s harvest.” He tapped Mira’s name. “Family makes the cut easier. They panic less when someone familiar steadies their hand.”

The world narrowed. Lena’s vision tunneled. The diagrams blurred into screaming faces.

Mira’s laughter rang in her ears, bright and defiant, from a life already erased.

The glass chamber door clanged open. A new body was dragged in, still conscious, mouth gagged. Its eyes locked on hers, pleading, before clamps pinned it to the steel.

A saw whined to life.

Lena’s scream joined the hum of machines, thin and useless.

And as ash drifted against the window, she understood the truth in full:

The good of the many was not salvation.
It was consumption.
And she was already on the menu.